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INVASION

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Code Page

<u>Invasion</u>

Copyright



One Year After the Clue Hunt

When Dan Cahill started talking kung fu movies, no force in the universe could make him stop. First he ranted about the bad lip-synching, then he rhapsodized about how Bruce Lee was so fast that movie directors asked him to slow down his punches so they could be captured on film. Atticus Rosenbloom lay the phone down on the windowsill to let his friend finish his monologue from a distance. Usually, talking to Dan made Atticus laugh so hard he almost choked on his retainer, but right now he couldn't muster a chuckle.

His mom and dad were outside by the car, giving final instructions to Atticus's older brother, Jake. The two siblings looked so different that people were always guessing that one was adopted, which forced Atticus to explain that, in actuality, they were half brothers. But Jake had been around from the moment Atticus was born, so they didn't count the difference.

Atticus knew he should be outside with his family, but he didn't want to start crying again and make his mom late for her appointment. Jake didn't cry. He just pretended everything was okay. Or maybe he just didn't care as much — Astrid was only his stepmom, after all.

As he peered out the window, Atticus saw his dad load the suitcases into the trunk while his mom hugged Jake. On the phone, Dan's tinny voice was now going on about a snarfing-related incident at school.

"Uh-huh," Atticus said into the phone before putting it down again.

He heard the car doors shut and watched Jake walk back to the house as their dad maneuvered the family's station wagon around the recycling bins and out into the suburban cul-de-sac. His mom looked up from the passenger seat to Atticus's window and gave him a wave as the car disappeared into the trees that lined the street. She looked so tiny and frail from Atticus's room. Her face was tight and thin, and even from a distance her hand looked like paper stretched over bone.

Atticus's chest heaved and he pressed the red button on the phone, cutting off Dan's voice. *Sorry*, *lost service*, he punched into a text and hit SEND.

Across the street, another station wagon pulled away from the curb. The driver was probably on his way to field hockey practice, the grocery store, or a family dinner out. Certainly not to a series of expensive medical appointments in New York City.

This wasn't ancient China, where emperor Qin Shi Huang's doctors gave him mercury pills to try to extend his life (in actuality, of course, they killed him). Modern medicine was supposed to know how to make people get *better*. But even the full staff of Harvard Medical School hadn't known what was wrong with Atticus's mom.



Simeon disassembled the microphone with mechanical precision. There was a place for every part, resting snugly in the foam inside a steel case. He glanced at the rearview mirror. As soon as the Rosenblooms' car disappeared from view, he slipped his transmission into drive and pulled out into the street.

His new long-range microphone was proving to be a great asset on this little break-in assignment. He'd just learned that Atticus and Jake Rosenbloom would be alone through the weekend. As soon as the two children left the house, Simeon could use his tools to gain entry into the study and liberate Astrid's files.

Simeon liked using his tools to break into things. He could break people, too, for that matter. Just like a penknife could encourage a lock to open, it could also encourage a person to spill his secrets. In either case, you just needed to apply the right pressure. Simeon's favorite tool was the ornately engraved weapon strapped to his chest. If things went south on a job, he could always fall back on his Cretan dagger.

Given what he knew of the Vespers, Simeon was surprised that they only wanted a few files from a sick professor. For five hundred years, the Vespers had been one of history's greatest crime organizations, sowing death and mayhem in their wake. Simeon had tortured for them, even murdered. But sometimes luck tossed him an easy job.

Simeon didn't really care either way. Working for the Vespers was really no different than working for any of the other syndicates, cartels, and dictators that had hired him in the past. The client just presented him with their concern, he picked the right tools, and he dealt with it.

Problem solved.



After school the next day, Jake and Atticus barely had a chance to toss down their book bags and punch in the security code before Atticus started complaining again. Jake groaned as he crouched down to unlace his running shoes. Coach had been pushing the team hard to be ready for the regional meet this weekend, and Jake was completely beat.

"I don't want to go," Atticus whined. "I'm sure you'll win and everything. But all I get to do is sit there and watch high-schoolers wearing tight pants run around in circles. Can't I just stay here and hang out with Dan?"

Jake sighed. Dad had told him to let Atticus have friends over — which inevitably meant Dan. Other than the Harvard professors who had identified Atticus as a prodigy and called to try to stump him with new logic problems, Dan Cahill was Atticus's only real friend.

Jake wasn't sure that the Cahill kid was a good influence on Atticus. Since the two had met in an online gaming chat room, there had been a marked uptick in fart jokes in the Rosenbloom household. Astrid said it was just the way eleven-year-old boys were, but Jake blamed Dan.

"We won't get into any trouble," Atticus promised.

Fat chance of that, with the Cahill kid in the mix, Jake thought.

"And I'll have my phone, so you can call me in between races."

Jake shook his head. "I promised Dad I wouldn't leave you here alone."

Atticus's face fell. "I won't be alone. Dan will be here."

At home, Atticus had books and online friends to distract him. Sitting in the bleachers for hours, Atticus would torture himself worrying about his mom. What could really go wrong if he stayed home? Atticus and Dan were dumb sometimes, but they weren't *that* dumb.

Jake glanced up at the security panel just inside the front door. Last year Jake's dad had installed a state-of-the-art security system so museums would lend him artifacts to study. If anyone came into the house without typing in the code, the police were guaranteed to be there in five minutes. Right now there was a priceless Aztec mask from the Peabody Museum in Dad's study, and the house was sealed as tight as a vault.

"Okay, sure." Jake stood up, slipping into his sneakers. "What do you want to do for dinner?"

Atticus perked up. "Hawaiian pizza?"

"Pizza? Again?"

It was the third night in a row.

"We can do something else if you want," Atticus said, but Jake could hear the disappointment in his voice.

Jake shrugged. "No, pizza is good. I'll go order it online."

"Then can we call Mom? We promised to check in," Atticus suggested.

Atticus tried to hide it, but Jake could see his lip was trembling. His little brother didn't want to call to let his mom know that he was okay. He needed to call to know that *she* was okay.

Jake didn't trust his voice, so he just nodded. He remembered when Dad had first pulled him aside to tell him why Astrid was looking so tired, why she had dropped out of her tennis league and was napping all the time. His father's voice had come out ragged and whispery, like something had clamped down on his vocal cords.

Now Jake's voice was threatening to do the same thing, and he couldn't let Atticus hear that. The kid was already teetering on the edge. It was Jake's job to keep him from losing it entirely.

It was just a matter of time before his whole world unraveled.



Dan Cahill nearly spilled his Twizzlers as he tried to walk down the sidewalk and open two packets at the same time. Lately he liked to wrap a red one around a black one and eat them together. It was just like the rest of his life — the normal version just wasn't enough anymore.

The truth was that he'd almost stolen the Twizzlers. Ever since he had taken lessons from Lightfinger Larry in safecracking and pocket-picking, Dan had these urges. He wanted to steal something, just for the thrill. He didn't mind paying, and he didn't want to hurt the guy who owned the store. But he was just so *bored*.

Less than two years ago, Dan Cahill had been a regular kid, and his biggest excitement had been seeing how many Slurpees he could down in a five-minute period. But that had all changed at his grandmother Grace's funeral, when Dan and his older sister, Amy, had learned something that shattered their world.

They were members of the most influential family history had ever known, a family whose members included everyone from Mozart to Annie Oakley. And throughout the Cahills' storied past, its rival branches had lied, stolen, and even murdered — all to find 39 Clues that were the key to the family's secret power.

Grace's funeral had sparked a final chase around the world for the Clues, engineered to bring the feuding branches together. In the end Dan and Amy collected all of the Clues but chose not to use them, leaving their secret locked in Dan's photographic memory.

Though Grace's dying wish had been for the hunt to usher in a new era of Cahill cooperation, Dan still couldn't stop himself from longing for the familiar high of outsmarting the other branches. At the time every moment had been terrifying, but now everything he did seemed dreary and colorless in comparison.

His phone blared out the chorus of Jonah Wizard's latest hit, "Gangstas Have Feelings, Too." Dan reached into his pocket, dug past the sticky Twizzler wrappers, and pulled it out. It was Atticus calling again.

"Ninja Assassins Incorporated, Dan Cahill speaking. Who would you like offed today?"

"Hey, Dan," Atticus answered glumly. Some days Atticus was just as bad as the walking history textbook who claimed to be Dan's sister, spouting fact after boring fact. But more often lately he was shut down and barely said a word. It almost made Dan long for one of Atticus's classic "in actuality" rants about Julius Caesar or some other long-dead dude.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm okay. Do you want to come over tomorrow night? My parents are out of town, so I can watch as much History Channel as I want."

"Dude, if I wanted to be bored, I'd steal Amy's diary again," Dan protested.

"They're showing a special on military vehicles so large that they fell apart under their own weight," Atticus offered. "And Jake said we could order pizza."

"I'm in. I'll get Nellie to drive me." It'd been a few weeks since he'd seen Atticus, who lived forty miles away in Cambridge. And although he considered the History Channel a form of cruel and unusual punishment, he was excited to see his friend.

It was starting to get dark as Dan said good-bye to Atticus, opened the gate, and started up the hill to Grace's mansion. He still thought of it that way, even though the house his grandmother had lived in

had burned down and then been rebuilt over the last year.

A movement in the woods caught his eye, and he felt his whole body clench. Was it *them*? He peered into the dusk, and a field mouse bolted across the driveway. He sighed and tried to pull himself together.

Dan walked more quickly, eyes roving over every shadow. He expected a Vesper to be waiting behind each tree, staring out with murderous eyes. Dan shivered. This was the one thing worse than being bored.

The leaves on the ground rustled in the wind, causing Dan to glance back and forth anxiously.

He broke into a trot, afraid to look behind even as he heard a car on the road. Dan wished he could dismiss his concern as paranoia, but these weren't made-up monsters or exaggerated fears. The Vespers were very real, and completely merciless.

He reached the mansion and sighed with relief as the door locked behind him with a satisfying thud. He knew there almost certainly wasn't a Vesper hiding in the woods, but once he started thinking about it his imagination just ran wild. And if Dan's sister was right about the threat, eventually the Vespers would attack. It was only a matter of time.



"I'm telling you, that one's true," Atticus insisted. They were finally playing one of his favorite games. The rules were simple: Atticus told Dan three crazy facts about history, and he had to guess which were true and which one was a lie. "They pickled General Pompey's head and gave it to Julius Caesar."

"Ugh," Dan said. "That must have tasted worse than cafeteria food."

Atticus rolled his eyes. "In actuality, no one ate pickled heads. It was more like a trophy or a warning. Caesar was upset when they gave him the head. He liked Pompey. It's all here in this Roman history book." Atticus reached into the pile of books and pulled out a massive volume. Mom

complained about the books littering the floor, but Atticus liked having them all laid out there for easy access. Except when he got up at night to go to the bathroom and stubbed his toe on Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

As Atticus went for the Roman history book, one of his notebooks fell out of the pile and landed at Dan's feet. Before Atticus could react, Dan swooped down and picked it up.

"What's this?" he said, opening it. "' "My Voyages with Marco Polo," by Atticus Rosenbloom," Dan read from the first page. "Sounds like a real page-turner."

"Hey, gimme that back!" Atticus yelled, lunging for the notebook. His masterpiece was nowhere near ready for public consumption. His face flamed at the idea of Dan reading the part where the intrepid eleven-year-old assistant explorer Atticus Rosenbloom saved Marco Polo from falling off the Great Wall of China.

Dan pulled the book back and Atticus fell past him, the two tumbling across the floor and into the pile of books. Through sheer luck Atticus landed on top of Dan with one of Dan's arms pinned beneath him. Atticus knew he only had a few seconds before Dan recovered — Dan was nearly two years older and way stronger. He pushed down on Dan's arm and grabbed for his notebook, grinning at his unlikely victory.

But before Atticus had time to crow, Dan started thrashing wildly, his eyes wide with panic. Atticus tried to get off, but he lost his balance and fell back down again on Dan's left arm. Atticus pushed to get up again, but something sent him reeling backward. It was Dan's right fist, connecting with Atticus's nose with a hideous crunch.



"I'm so sorry, dude." Dan was horrified. He could still feel the throb in his fist where his punch had landed home. When Atticus fell on top of him, he had felt the tightness in his chest from his asthma,

and suddenly he'd been hit by a wall of panic. Some sick instinct from the Clue hunt had taken over completely, and Dan had lashed out.

There was blood on the knuckles of his right hand. Atticus was holding his nose and more blood gushed from where Dan's blow had landed.

"It's — it's okay," Atticus said. "I'm sorry I fell on top of you."

"No, I'm sorry. I went crazy and . . ." Dan didn't know how to explain what had happened. Instead he pulled off his shirt and offered it to Atticus, who flinched away, his shoulders slumped.

Dan had done it again. He'd let the hunt for the 39 Clues take another person away from him. Maybe it was better this way. He was too dangerous to allow himself to have friends — in the end they all got hurt.

Atticus seemed smaller, shriveled into himself. The authority he'd had when talking about history had disappeared. He was only ten, and even if he was some kind of super-genius headed to Harvard, right now Dan could only see the little kid.

Even Dan's bare belly button disapproved of his behavior, a wide O of shock. Dan reached down and grabbed the flesh of his stomach. He might not have six-pack abs, but with a little help he could make his belly button open and close, which was sort of impressive.

"That Dan Cahill is a huge jerkface, huh?" his belly button said in a gravelly voice. It had been many years since Dan had watched *Sesame Street*, but he'd perfected the sister-repellent monster voice, and the skill never really went away. "Someone should really teach him a lesson. Like, bleed all over his shirt. That would show that Cahill bonehead."

Despite his bleeding nose, Atticus smiled.

"Anyway, forget that guy," his belly button said. "Just hang out with me. As long as you keep feeding me pizza, I promise not to eat you."

Dan was relieved when Atticus laughed. His friend had been acting so distant lately. Dan hoped he hadn't ruined things entirely. Other than Atticus, Dan's sister, Amy, was the closest thing Dan had to a friend. Which was pathetic, because most of the time Amy was pretty lame.

"I'm sorry, Att," he said in his own voice. "I just couldn't breathe, and I freaked out."

"It's okay," Atticus answered, smiling weakly. "At least now I can say I've met a talking belly button."

"You know who would really hate that dude?" Dan grinned, handing his phone to Atticus. "My sister. She's out on a date with her boyfriend. Maybe he'll see it and it will save him from having to listen to her for an entire dinner."

Atticus used Dan's camera to frame his belly perfectly, cutting out the hands moving it. Atticus wasn't satisfied with the first attempt, but after a few takes they had a cinematic masterpiece, ready for a red-carpet release. Dan took back the phone, selected Amy's number, and pressed send. It didn't go through, so he hit the button again.

Dan's laugh caught in his chest. His phone had no service. *Signal interrupted*, the notification said. But this was the special phone Mr. McIntyre had ordered for him, with a supercharged receiver and service from every network. It *always* had a strong signal, even when Nellie drove them through the tunnel of the Big Dig or went into the mountains.

"What's wrong?" Atticus asked as Dan grabbed his friend's phone from the desk and checked it.

No signal there, either.

Dan flicked off the light and stepped to the window. It was dark, but he could make out a car parked at the end of the driveway. He tried to breathe deeply. This was just another false alarm, like the squirrel the other day. The person was probably just visiting someone nearby and needed a parking spot.

He almost believed it, until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. His stomach sank. There were antennas sprouting from the roof of the car. They looked just like the signal jammers he'd seen at one of the Cahill family's interminable security briefings. Dan's pulse quickened as the car doors swung open and two dark shapes stepped out. One was slight and moved like a panther, while the other was huge and had biceps the size of Atticus's waist.

"Someone's outside," Dan said, breathing slowly to try to stay calm. "And I think they're jamming our cell phones."

Atticus laughed. "Nice one. Next you'll tell me they're here to steal the mask from the Peabody. . . ." He shoved Dan out of the way to get a view. They watched together as the two shapes started up the driveway. "Burglars," Atticus squeaked. "Real burglars. What do we do?"

"We have to get out and call the police." A part of Dan wanted to try to scare the burglars away, but he knew better. There was nothing they could steal that was worth risking his life over.

The boys sprinted down the stairs and Dan was about to lead them through the back door when he caught a glimpse of movement. He grabbed Atticus and they headed for the kitchen window. Another shape was sneaking across the backyard. The moon was low in the sky, outlining a hulking silhouette. They backed out of the kitchen and tried the landline phone in the living room, but there was only silence on the other end. As they went back up the stairs to Atticus's bedroom, the high-pitched squeal of a drill echoed from the front hallway.

"Dad installed a super-expensive security system so museums can lend him artifacts. It sounds like they're trying to get around it," Atticus whispered, looking up at Dan with wide eyes. "What do we do?"

"We hide. If they're here for the stuff in your dad's study, we stay upstairs. As soon as they're gone, we call the police."

"But if they steal the Aztec mask from the Peabody Museum . . ." Atticus trailed off, mouth working open and closed but no sound coming out.

"Dude, did you see the size of that guy in the backyard?" Dan answered. "A mask isn't worth getting killed for."

"No." Atticus shook his head, his face pinching up as he tried not to cry. "Dad will get fired. My mom . . . she's really sick, Dan. She left this weekend to go see expensive specialists in New York. All the normal doctors have no idea what's wrong. They've given up on her. If Dad loses his job, I don't know what we'll do."

Dan froze. This was the secret that Atticus had been keeping. This was why he'd been acting so weird for the last month.

Dan didn't really remember his parents anymore, but he would never forget the flames the night that they died. The flames, and the people shouting as he and Amy stood outside the burning house and clutched each other in their pajamas. He remembered the cold police station afterward, sitting in that metal chair for what seemed like hours while a woman in a blue uniform filled out the papers that said yes, your parents are really dead.

They still had the two papers, in the security deposit box at the bank. The certificate of death looked like an award, with curly borders and an official state seal. Here's the date and time that you last talked to your dad, it said. And here's the stamp that says your mom will never hug you again.

Dan had traveled the world and outsmarted some of the nastiest characters out there. He was one of the leaders of the most powerful family the world had ever known. And Atticus was a child genius. Together, they could outsmart a few dumb criminals.

Outside, they heard a thud and then more drilling.

He took a deep breath. "Nobody is going to take that mask."

Atticus didn't say anything. He just grabbed Dan's arm and squeezed hard.

"Easy there, dude," Dan said, grinning weakly. "We have a burglary to foil."



"Rosenbloom!" Coach roared. "You're up in five. Tighten your laces and stretch out."

Jake glanced down at his phone as he did one last set of leg bends. Three calls and two texts, and he'd heard nothing from Atticus. His brother had promised to keep his phone on. Jake had even called the number Atticus gave him for that Cahill kid, but it went straight to voice mail, too.

The Cambridge High School athletic field shone like an emerald under the bright floodlights. Out on the track, Jake's friend Sam was putting on a burst of speed to pass the kid from Newton and move

into second place. The stands weren't nearly as big as the ones on the football or baseball fields, but they were packed with parents, siblings, and students from five Boston suburbs, cheering as the runners rounded the final lap of the 1600-meter event.

Jake yelled along with the rest of his team as Sam closed in on a Somerville boy for the lead, his legs pumping like pistons. In the end, the two were neck and neck, and the crowd roared as they passed the finish line together. The timekeepers came up with a quarter-second advantage for Somerville, and Jake's coach roared out onto the track to argue the decision.

Jake finished tightening the laces on his running shoes and pulled out his phone to try one more time. He dialed Atticus, but it went straight to voice mail. Then Dan — the same. He checked his email, his IMs, and even CliqueMe. Nothing. He called the landline, and didn't even get a ring. Just a woman's robotic voice telling him the line was out of service.

I wasn't supposed to leave him alone, he thought. I promised Astrid I would take care of him while she's sick. Jake felt sick to his stomach himself.

Coach was still arguing with the timekeepers and the league officials as Jake turned and slipped into the darkness behind the bleachers. Someone else would have to run his laps tonight. He had to check on his brother.

"You're up," he said as he passed Ranjit, the scrawny freshman who was Jake's backup in the 800-meter.

Jake broke out into a sprint as he reached the parking lot. Their house was three-quarters of a mile away, but Jake was already wearing his running shoes.



Dan's stomach sank as he glanced around the room. A mostly empty box of pizza wasn't going to stop the massive burglars he'd spotted outside. They looked like contestants from a weight-lifting competition.

Back at the mansion they had a locker full of weapons and explosives. Amy had insisted that they get equipment to defend themselves from the Vespers, but Uncle Fiske wouldn't let Dan take any of it out of the house. What was the point of having an arsenal of weapons if you didn't have one when you were in trouble?

Dan's eyes caught the box of paintballs poking out from under Atticus's bed.

"If we hide," he explained, "they'll just take what they want. If we fight them, they'll kick our butts. We have to wear them down. Traps, tricks, stuff like that."

Atticus jumped up. "It'll be just like how the Russians beat Napoleon — they couldn't win an outright battle, so they just kept retreating until the French army was too beat up to fight anymore!"

"Um, okay. Yeah." The only thing Dan knew about Napoleon was that the dude hid his hand in his coat whenever people were painting him. Dan used to think that Napoleon was hiding his hand because it had six fingers or maybe a second thumb, but Amy had insisted that it was just the way people posed back then. Leave it to her to turn an awesome mutant general into an art history lesson.

The drilling continued outside as they made their preparations. Dan was sure the burglars would burst in before they were ready, but the door held as they ran around the house to set their traps. Finally, they were armed: a baseball bat and old hockey helmet for Dan, and a stainless-steel pot "helmet" and a high-powered paintball gun for Atticus.

All right, Dan thought as he charged down the hall. It's time for justice. Dan Cahill style. And then he caught a glance of his reflection in the darkened window.

He didn't look like a great warrior ready to go into battle. He looked like a kid playing in his backyard. How were two geeky kids supposed to hold off three grown men?

But it was too late now.

Dan swung his baseball bat, smashing one of the windows and dislodging the security company's sensor. The house alarm blared for five seconds before it abruptly went silent.

"It worked," Atticus whispered before they split up. "We tripped the alarm! The guy who installed the system guaranteed that police would be here in five minutes."

Dan grinned weakly. "Five minutes. We just need to not get killed for five minutes."



Simeon hadn't made a mistake. He had the right technique, the right information, and the right tools. But still, the alarm had gone off, and he'd been forced to cut the wires. The house was supposed to be empty, but he'd heard the sound of a window breaking. Someone was in the house. Someone knew he was coming.

This wasn't part of the plan, but it was too late now. He'd promised Vesper One that he would acquire the targeted items. And no one failed Vesper One.

With no need to worry about the security system, Simeon used a small pointed hammer to crack the glass and reached through to open the door. It swung open easily, inviting him into the quiet house. There was no light in the entry hallway, and flicking on the switch did no good. Glancing up, he saw that the lightbulbs had been broken, leaving him in near darkness.

Statues lined the way, leering out from small alcoves as he and his two goons advanced. He could tell they were replicas, worth maybe a hundred dollars each. Nothing compared to the Aztec mask, which would go for tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars on the black market. But he hadn't come for artifacts. Vesper One wanted Astrid Rosenbloom's files, and Simeon would make sure his employer got what he paid for.

As Simeon and his crew reached the end of the hallway, they came to an open room with stairs up to a balcony. Simeon noticed that the last alcove in the hallway was empty. There also seemed to be something dripping down the wall below the balcony. He froze and gave the clenched-fist hand signal for a halt, but the taller of his two goons kept moving forward. Suddenly, there was a whistling sound and the missing statue came sailing down from the balcony and broke over the tall burglar's head. A smaller man might have been knocked unconscious, but the bulky Vesper just yelled in pain and

charged up the stairs. A blond kid appeared on the balcony, his mouth open in shock.

"Stop!" Simeon shouted. The kid took a neat sidestep into a bedroom while the tall goon careened past, unable to stop. The big man planted his feet but he kept sliding, as if he were skating on ice. He rammed into the banister and it crunched under his weight, sending him crashing back down to the first floor.

"Get up, idiot!" Simeon barked. "You're twice his size. Go slowly and carefully and he won't be able to stop you."

The tall goon grunted and headed up the stairs a second time.

"And you," Simeon ordered, gesturing to the shorter goon. "Go see if there's anyone else. I don't want any more surprises."



Atticus's mom loved their gleaming hardwood floors because they were elegant, but Atticus loved them because they were great for skating across in his socks. The burglars were wearing shoes, so he and Dan had emptied a bottle of olive oil on the floor to make it extra slippery.

He heard the burglar advancing up the stairs a second time, but he had his own problems to focus on. Peering out from behind the couch in the living room, he had a clear view down the hall to where the shorter burglar was approaching. He was wearing a black balaclava, but luckily no mask.

Atticus gripped his paintball gun as the man slowly advanced. Atticus's instinct was to strike now, and he had to force himself to wait as the intruder approached. His aim wasn't that great, and while he knew from experience that being hit with a paintball stung, it wouldn't do anything to slow a grown man.

Atticus held his breath as the man approached, hoping that he was well hidden in the dim room. He'd left a bright light on in the hallway, so the burglar would be blind in the dark living room. A famous quotation from the battle of Bunker Hill flitted into Atticus's mind: *Don't fire until you see*

the whites of their eyes. In actuality, no one was sure if General Israel Putnam had really given the order, but it was still good advice.

Atticus slid down below the back of the sofa and held his breath as the man walked into the living room. He waited a long, cool second as the man looked around. Finally, the man took a step forward and Atticus popped up from behind the sofa and opened fire. The paintballs exploded on the man's face, and the burglar stepped back, shouting and wiping at his eyes. Atticus dropped the paintball gun and ran, his dreadlocks bouncing as he darted out of the living room and dashed down the stairs to the basement.

The burglar followed cautiously, still wiping paint out of his eyes. As Atticus huddled in a corner of the basement, he heard the intruder descending into the darkness, testing each step on the way down. But Atticus hadn't weakened the wooden steps to collapse under the man's weight — he had no desire to be stuck in a confined space with an angry criminal.

Atticus hoped the lack of light would hide him, but the moon was shining through the window as the burglar advanced across the basement. The man pulled off his black balaclava, used it to wipe the paint from his face, and glared across the room at Atticus. His nose was flattened and he had a nasty scar along his jawline.

"Listen, kid," the man said, carefully stepping over old bikes and gardening equipment. "I didn't want to hurt you, but you tried to stop us. Just give up, and you'll live through this. Otherwise . . ." He smacked his fist against his palm with a sickening *thud*.

Atticus said nothing, counting silently to himself as the man approached through the gloom. *Five, four* . . . the man looked around, expecting something to fly at him . . . *three, two* . . . finally, the burglar stepped over the last shovel . . . *one*.

Atticus flipped the switch. A powerful lightbulb went on, bathing the room in light. Atticus was forced to squint, but there was an array of fifty mirrors behind him, all focused on the burglar. The man yelled in shock as his face was blasted with light.

The Greek inventor Archimedes had supposedly used a series of mirrors on cliffs to burn holes in the sails of Roman invaders' ships. Atticus had adapted the principle to win the state science fair, and now his science project gave him the opportunity to dash up the stairs while the burglar tripped over bikes, broken weed whackers, and garden hoses, clutching at his temporarily blinded eyes.

At the top of the stairs, Atticus slammed the door shut and locked it. It took several seconds of shoving, but he finally toppled a trophy case, which fell across the door with a crash. It held the two brothers' academic awards and Jake's track-and-field trophies, though now a certificate was ripped and one of the trophies had snapped in two. But right now, trapping a burglar in the basement was the only prize Atticus cared about.



Dan pressed back into the closet as the intruder's footsteps came down the hall toward him. Dan stood knee-deep in Jake's dirty laundry, and he was pretty sure there were some sweaty socks or something down there. They did *not* smell pretty.

Dan tried to hold his breath as he heard the tall burglar turning the handle. The sound of the door hinges squeaking open filtered into the musty closet. Dan's hand was poised over the remote control, but then the noise abruptly stopped.

For a moment Dan panicked. Had the burglar seen the trap? Dan listened for two horrified seconds until he heard the noise he had been waiting for. The burglar took another step — he was in the room. Dan jammed his finger down on the remote and covered his ears.

"Yo!" Jonah Wizard's voice screamed out as the bass drum throbbed and synthesizers blared. "This gangsta may not be teary eyed, but that doesn't mean he don't hurt on the inside. Even gangstas got feelings. . . ." Dan didn't know where Jake had gotten the enormous speakers, but the dude had a ridiculously overpowered sound system. And if the burglar's yells were any measure, they had been

placed at ear level right where the burglar was standing. The song cued up didn't even get through the first line before one of the speakers went flying across the room and smacked into the wall.

Dan pressed his eye to the narrow slit between the wall and the closet door and saw the burglar advance to the center of the room, clawing frantically at his ears. Dan's heart froze as the hulking man stumbled toward the closet door. *Outside*, Dan mouthed silently. *Look outside*.

His heart restarted as the burglar veered off toward the window. Dan had left it hanging open, with the anchors of a metal fire-escape ladder hooked to the sill. The man swore and stepped to the window, leaning out to look for his prey.

His ears ringing with the sound of Jonah Wizard's hit single, the burglar couldn't hear the closet door open, or the sound of Dan tiptoeing across the room with a baseball bat.

Here's the pitch, Dan heard the Red Sox radio announcer's voice in his head as he wound up. Ortiz swings... The man yelled as the bat made contact, and his legs flailed in the air as he jolted forward. It's deep right, way back... Dan dropped the bat and slammed his shoulder into the burglar's butt... waaaay back... the man yelled hoarsely as he fell headfirst toward the ground outside. Dan heard tree branches cracking as the man fell, and then a thud, followed by a yelp from below. And it's gone! The Red Sox win it!



Simeon heard the blaring music from the upstairs bedrooms, and the shouts from the basement. But they didn't mean anything to him. He didn't care if the goons killed the children.

He had a job to do.

The wires were snipped, and the security devices were inoperative. Now all he had to do was pick the lock on the study door, grab the files, and run.

But something was off. He tried to jiggle the pick, but it wouldn't move. He withdrew it slowly—and found it covered in goop. Honey. The brats had squirted honey in the lock to slow him down.

No matter, he thought as he pulled out his hacksaw and screwdriver. Honey couldn't stop a man with the right tools. Simeon started to twist the screwdriver when something exploded against his hand. There was a great stinging *thwack* against his temple. He raised his arm to protect his face and touched wet paint on his balaclava. It was one of the anklebiters again. But Simeon certainly had the tools for *this* job.

He reached under his jacket and slid the Cretan dagger out of its sheath. Its engraved surface gleamed in the moonlight as he spun quickly to charge at the small boy running toward the back of the house.

When the Rosenbloom kid reached the glass doors in the kitchen that led outside, he stopped and turned. Simeon slowed down and glanced around him. A menacing smile spread across his face as he saw the metal trip wire hooked into an electrical outlet.

"I understand you're something of a history buff," Simeon said as he stepped delicately over the wire. "I think you should know that you're going to be killed by a weapon that dates back to ancient Crete." Atticus tried to dive past him, but Simeon's arm flashed out to seize Atticus by the throat. "The Romans, the Saracens, the Venetians, the Turks. In the end the occupiers all faced the Cretan dagger when their power began to wane."

The boy only squeaked at him, eyes wide.

Simeon raised the dagger, but before he could strike he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. He dropped the boy and spun, dancing aside as the blond kid rushed at him with a baseball bat. Simeon effortlessly stepped back, and the bat smacked into the kitchen counter.

Simeon grinned as he advanced on the blond boy. It had been far too long since his weapon had tasted blood. The quarters were too close for the blond boy to swing his bat effectively, and the Cretan dagger had an unquenchable thirst.



Atticus watched in horror as the burglar lunged forward with his dagger. Dan swung the bat, but it got caught in the pots and pans hanging from the kitchen ceiling. As Dan pulled the bat free, the burglar ducked and twisted, launching a powerful kick that crunched into Dan's stomach. Dan crumpled to the ground, wheezing, and the burglar leaned over and drew back his weapon to strike.

"No!" Atticus shouted and leaped at the man, grabbing his dagger arm with both hands. The burglar reared up and swung his arm, banging Atticus into the counter, then the cabinets, and finally sending him sprawling in front of the sliding glass doors.

The man ran his finger along the engraved flat of the dagger's blade as he turned around to advance. Through blurry vision Atticus saw Dan crawling toward him, his face flushed bright red as he desperately puffed on his inhaler.

Atticus tried to crawl left, but the man stepped to his right with his dagger, forcing Atticus to shrink back against the glass door. There was no escape. The gleaming knife swayed back and forth in front of him like the head of a viper.

There was a flash of silver as the man pulled the knife back for one killing blow, and then a blur of the colors of Cambridge High School. With a roar, Jake Rosenbloom lowered his shoulder and slammed into the burglar from behind. Glass shattered as the man crashed through the doors and tumbled onto the back porch.

Sirens blared from the front of the house. Atticus had survived the longest five minutes of his life. The police had arrived.

Atticus finally let his breath out and took in ragged gasps of air, watching as the burglar sprinted off into the woods.

"Att, what happened?" Jake asked as he pulled Atticus to his feet and wrapped him in a hug.

"They were burglars, probably after the mask in Dad's study. Dan and I knew we couldn't stand up to them, so we fought them with traps."

Jake pushed Atticus far enough away that he could look down into his brother's eyes. "You *fought* them? No stupid mask is worth your life. You could have been killed!"

He wasn't sure when it had started, but Atticus realized he was crying. "I know we should have run, or hidden, or given up. But Jake, if they got the mask and Dad lost his job. . . ."

Jake looked down at his brother in shock.

"Dad and Mom can't take anything else right now. And if Dad loses his job, what about Mom? We won't have the money to figure out why she's sick." Atticus's eyes gleamed with tears.

Jake grabbed his brother by the shoulders. "Att! You could have died."

"You wouldn't understand!" Atticus yelled. "She's not that important to you!"

"What? Of course she . . ." Jake shook his head in disbelief. "Why would you think that?"

"You act like nothing's wrong! Whenever I try to talk about it, you try to cheer me up." Atticus pulled away, and Jake was forced to let him go. "It's okay. I get it. She's not really your mom."

Jake's stricken face was outlined by the blue and red flashing lights from the police cars outside. "Att, she *is* my mom. She may not be my biological mother, but she woke me up to go to school, and patched me up when I got hurt, and made me dinner every night for the last twelve years. I've actually known her longer than you have! If the doctors in New York can't figure out what's wrong with her, I don't know what I'll do." Jake drew in a shuddering breath. "I was trying to be brave for you! But if I thought saving that mask would save her life, I would have taken on a hundred burglars myself."

Atticus grabbed his brother and buried his face in the front of Jake's tracksuit again. He didn't know what to say, so he just held on as tight as he possibly could. Jake hugged him back, and Atticus could feel sobs rattling in his brother's chest. By the time the police pulled them apart and took them outside, there was a big wet spot on the front of Jake's tracksuit and Atticus's ribs were sore from Jake's hug.

The police hauled them away to the station and kept Atticus up half the night trying to help an artist sketch the burglars. But Atticus didn't mind. All three burglars had escaped, and Atticus didn't mind that, either. He didn't mind any of it, because the police had called his dad, and by the time Detective Corelli dropped the kids back off at their house, the family station wagon was waiting in the driveway.

Mom was coughing as she stepped out of the car and the predawn sky silhouetted her frighteningly thin frame, but there was still a fierce gleam in her eye. Atticus ran to her, dropping the pointless papers the police had given them. She wrapped him in a ferocious hug, for a moment as strong as she had ever been.



Dan watched the Rosenblooms' reunion through the window of the police car. Despite the crazy night, Atticus somehow seemed more whole than he had for weeks. His mom was still sick, but they were all together as a family — and Jake and Atticus seemed closer than ever.

For Dan, nothing had changed. When he got home, his parents wouldn't be waiting in the driveway. The only thing waiting for Dan was the certainty that the Vesper threat was real.

And last night had reminded Dan what that threat really meant. His best friend had been a moment away from bleeding to death on his own kitchen floor. With only one thrust of a knife, someone else he loved could disappear forever.

And the Vespers were out there, waiting for their moment to strike.

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